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ABSTRACT

There are indications that increasing numbers of people will seek career changes at mid-life. The data that are available suggest that these people will seek to make career shifts for both voluntary and involuntary reasons and that their change will be both within and between fields. Also, many will require additional education. Their educational needs differ from those of the typical younger student. Education's response to these needs includes some of the following: a vast array of courses focusing on both personal development and vocational needs; a wide assortment of new degrees for the nontraditional adult student; and the recognition and awarding of institutional credit for life experiences. Central issues for higher education institutions are admissions, counseling, curriculum development, instructional delivery systems, placement services, and research. A problem for large, multi-purpose institutions developing new programs and delivery systems for such clientele is making the distinction between a professional school and a trade school. All programs in an institution draw their strength and identity from their relationship with that institution. One can expect that in the development of new programs there will be conflicts among traditional institutional goals, student needs, workplace requirements, and faculty incentives. (JH)

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CAREER CHANGES IN MID-LIFE:
SOME EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

by

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Interactions between careers and age are currently being studied by developmental psychologists and others interested in middle age and adulthood. One aspect of this relationship which has many ramifications for society and educational institutions is the indication that increasing numbers of people will seek career changes at mid-life.

It is my purpose here to examine briefly selected evidence for this assumption and to cite some of the implications for educational institutions. It must be pointed out, however, that although the literature on work and careers is substantial, studies focusing on mid-career change and mid-life transitions are few. Even so, evidence is available which suggests that (1) many middle-aged persons will experience a "mid-life crisis," one component of which may be the career relationship, and (2) many will make career changes within and between fields.

Evidence

Data on the needs of adults making or contemplating career changes or on the actual frequency of such changes are generally nonexistent. Sarason (Note 1) has indicated that the evidence is mostly a product of observations and interviews with middle-aged persons. In a personal

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communication, he stated that one of his group's activities has been to search through Who's Who, 1974-75, for letter "A"; 1950-51, for "B"; and 1934-35, for "C," a search which generated over 7,000 names. The names were then categorized for degree of career change, going, for example, from physician to minister to lesser degrees. He found that 40% of the entries in each of the three years had made one or another form of career change, with the second largest category involving extreme change.

Sarason, Sarason, and Cowden (1975) analyzed the applicants to selected graduate schools and found that 10 to 20% of them were 25 years of age or older. Additional evidence of the number of persons seeking career changes is the observation that employment agencies are springing up for those desiring new careers at mid-life.

Hiestand (1971) also presents some evidence of mid-life career change. He estimates, based upon an analysis of the ages of students enrolled in selected professional and graduate schools, that at least 6% of the full-time students are 35 or older. If part-time students had been included, the percentage would probably be higher.

These data suggest that large numbers of adults will seek to make career shifts for both voluntary and involuntary reasons and that these changes will be both within and between fields and many will require additional education. Hiestand (1971) reports that a higher percentage of older persons attending graduate schools is found in

professional programs such as education, library science, social work, and the like than in natural sciences, mathematics, and engineering. He concludes that the higher proportion of older students in the service fields relates to manpower shortages, available financial support, and the shorter preparation period required by these disciplines.

Dynamics of Career Shifting

The dynamics underlying mid-career changes are varied, complex, and not well understood. Listed here are some of the reasons given in the literature for career changing; they also provide insight into the needs of career-changing adults:

1. The so-called "mid-life crisis" may power new-career and lifestyle desires. The career may be viewed as one vehicle for crisis resolution.

2. The adult perception of the "social worth" of an occupation may change. Not believing they are engaged in socially useful occupations, adults may desire or seek change. This may account in part for the attraction of the helping professions.

3. Increasing career options both within and between fields are becoming available, suggesting that an individual's interests within a field may shift with changes in the field.

4. The belief that work should be stimulating and provocative permeates our society; thus, if one is bored

with work and faced with a shortening life span, a need for change may be precipitated.

5. Similarly, a discrepancy between work expectations and what is actually experienced on the job may contribute to job dissatisfaction.

6. Changing attitudes about the work ethic and the value placed on nonwork activities may suggest a less time-consuming career.

7. Mastery of a trade or profession may not provide sufficient incentive to continue its practice if one seeks challenge. Trade mastery may thus lead to job dissatisfaction and the desire for a new career.

8. Given the competitive nature of entry into the professions, some argue that many people go through life knowing they were not able to prepare for the career of first choice, Sarason et al. (1975). As they grow older, such people may seek adjustment in their work.

9. An individual's career or job may become obsolete as a result of technological changes or he may be forced into the marketplace because of economic changes, company mergers, etc.

10. For a variety of reasons, more women are desiring a career or are reentering the marketplace, particularly after children have left home.

11. Some individuals may be driven to new careers by the dead-end syndrome--that is, a job in which they perform minor functions and are unable to move up the career ladder.

12. An individual may see himself as unsuccessful in his career, whether success is measured by status or money. He may also have a feeling of personal obsolescence and thus wish for self-renewal through a career shift.

13. Early-retirement provisions in certain occupations may lead to new careers.

This list could be expanded, but what it suggests are two general reasons for making a career change. The first involves the personal relationship between the individual and his occupation, where he may seek a change voluntarily; the second involves external forces. Thus, on one hand, social, technological, and economic forces may power career shifts, and, on the other, the shift may be a result of feelings and attitudes gained from the occupation. Some persons are forced to make a change and perhaps do so with reluctance and bitterness, the decision having been made for them by events over which they have limited control. For others, the change is voluntary, growing out of a close examination of the meaning of work and how they relate to it. The latter group might approach reeducation with a set of attitudes, different from those of people forced to change.

One can assume that these forces will continue to operate and that as a result more people will in the future attempt to make job shifts. As the concept of preparing for multiple careers rather than for one career finds its way into educational practice, career-changing behavior will be reinforced.

Adult Needs

What are the needs of adults contemplating or making career changes? Do they differ from those of younger people preparing for entry into the professions? Questions like these are much easier asked than answered. Little is known about adult students aside from statistical information of those enrolled in adult education classes and a few demographic characteristics such as age, sex and education. Furthermore, these data are seldom related to wider issues of a theoretical or practical nature.

For an institution, the question thus becomes: How can available data be used in program development? In fact, the state of the art is such that an institution may not know what kind of data it needs to facilitate educational response.

Hiestand (1971) explored the reasons students gave for entering or reentering professional and graduate schools and identified such factors as intrinsic interest in the subject, need to acquire a new skill or an increasingly important skill in the present field, desire to realize an earlier ambition, need to acquire necessary credentials, and available financial support for the entry. Hopper and Osborn (1975) in a recent study of adult students in England identified the following characteristics of students enrolled in adult programs, including those of the Open University:

1. Ambivalence about their long-term goals and their

power to obtain them;

2. Negative discrepancy between levels of normative expectation and achievement levels;

3. Feelings of relative deprivation;

4. Low sense of self-esteem with respect to occupational role and ambivalence in general about capacities as spouse, parent, worker, citizen, and student;

5. Isolation from supportive relationships and feelings of marginality within families, status groups, and occupational roles.

These and similar studies suggest that the characteristics and concerns of returning adult students can be classified as follows:

1. Psychological
   - -ambivalence
   - -fear of failure
   - -depression
   - -self-doubts about ability to study, to get along
   - -fear of the risk
   - -low self-esteem
   - -high level of anxiety and frustration
   - -feelings of being different from other students, of marginality
   - -sense of time loss
   - -attempt to find identity
2. Educational
   - -immediate and practical goal orientation

-poor study and academic skills

-concerns about performance ability, admissions, orientation, acceptance as a student, financial costs, child care, counseling process, and so on

These characteristics suggest that the nature of the relationship between the adult student and the educational institution will be different from that of the typical younger student. An area of crucial difference is time perspective: For the younger student, time is endless, but for the adult the return to school may be the one last chance before it is too late. The institution should recognize that the decision to return involves risk and expense and carries a sense of immediacy. The adult student has less flexibility than the young student, and the institution must respond by being more flexible than it has been in the past.

Educational Implications

The concept of multiple careers is emerging as a core concept of the lifelong-education thrust, with implications for all levels of education, particularly for secondary education. As Sarason, et al. (1975) point out, the key issue is to prepare persons ". . . for thinking about and planning for more than one career" (p. 591). Should that concept find its way into secondary schools, it would have significant impact on post-secondary education.

A recent book by Wirtz (1975) describes the need for and the issues associated with multiple careers. He proposes

a number of alternatives one of which suggests that all adults be awarded the equivalent of one year deferred education opportunity despite the level of education attained. What he is suggesting is free tuition for educational experience a person may wish. The educational implication of this proposal is vast indeed.

Further evidence of the implications of multiple careers and mid-life issues is that the Social Science Research Council has recently formed a Committee on Work and Personality in the Middle Years (Brim and Abeles, 1975). This committee has sponsored a series of meetings to discuss such topics as the mid-life crisis, death and the concept of social time, and interaction between work and personality, and it is serving as an information-exchange vehicle for social scientists working in the area. These and other efforts--such as the Report of the Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee (1974) suggest that the issues of career change and multiple careers will receive increasing attention.

Education's Response

Listed below are some of the more typical outcomes of institutions responding to adult needs and building education-work articulation.

1. A vast array of courses focusing on both personal development and vocational needs and in a variety of settings internal and external to the main institutional thrust. Community colleges in particular have attempted to articu-

late educational programming with local community needs.

2. A wide assortment of "new" degrees for the non-traditional adult student: external, extension, adult, assessment, etc.

3. The recognition and awarding of institutional credit for life experiences, both personal and vocational.

4. Innovative counseling and guidance arrangements where the focus is on mid-career issues.

5. Development of new-careers or second-careers programs designed to facilitate career change.

Two activities which have implications for universities and colleges are the Open University in England and the U.S. Department of Labor's Technology Mobilization and Re-employment Program. My experience with the Open University indicates that the institution is both sensitive and responsive to work-education problems. Its central concepts are too complex for development in this article; even so, its program and outreach efforts should be examined carefully. Readers not familiar with the Open University may wish to examine the recent literature on the institution (Turnstall, 1974; Perry, 1976).

The U.S. Department's efforts as reported by Kinn (1973) carried out in collaboration with a number of colleges, resulted in the development of short-term, highly specific courses designed to facilitate the transition of displaced engineers and scientists into new careers. This activity is convincing evidence that higher education can respond to specific client needs.

Central Issues for Higher Education Institutions

If large, multi-purpose four year institutions plan graduate degree programs for mid-career-changing adults, they might consider the following key issues:

1. Admissions. If programs or courses for adults seeking career changes are developed, university admissions policies, including criteria for admission, must be examined. A factor here is the means by which an individual's prospects for success in a graduate program are determined. Another is that current practice suggests that age has been used as an admissions criterion, with the older student experiencing discrimination, particularly in established graduate degree programs. Traditional attitudes of faculty toward older students clearly need modification. An evaluation of the adult student's life experiences becomes particularly significant when one considers that his/her initial degree may have been earned years earlier. Finally, an institution must make careful assessment of the adult's motivation for reentry and change.

2. Academic and personal counseling. Associated with program planning is the institution's obligation to develop realistic counseling services for adults. Not only do adult students need to understand the various educational and career options available, they must also understand the risks and costs involved in such an undertaking. Career shifting can be an emotionally and economically hazardous adventure even for the most secure person.

Programs can, of course, be viewed as a means of providing those who have been job-displaced with a mechanism for new-career preparation. Yet, as frequently suggested, there is some danger that assistance programs may be transformed into incentive systems which encourage the undertaking of alternatives that perhaps should be avoided in the best interest of the individual.

Finally, the laissez-faire--almost cavalier--approach to academic counseling so characteristic of large institutions should be replaced by a more viable and meaningful academic encounter between student and faculty.

3. Curriculum development. Programs developed for adults to assist them in new-career acquisition must focus on the specific requirements of the work activity, which suggests the need for a strong link between the institution and the workplace; such a link would help synchronize institutional offerings and vocational demands. There is clearly a need for a more sophisticated needs-assessment procedure focusing on career requirements. Following the assessment, the institution must make a judgment about what it can provide and what can be acquired by the student in actual practice.

Another factor in curriculum development is the recognition that selected skills acquired by the student in other settings frequently can be transferred to the new location. It may thus be necessary to carry out skills-analysis procedures with the student in order to determine his/her performance level.

As implied earlier, adults seek career changes for many reasons, some relating to personal development, which suggests the need for both career and self-oriented activities. I see the curriculum developing into a series of experiences organized in a variety of time frames rather than into the traditional term course. Finally, a fundamental question in curriculum development is this: Does the institution possess adequate faculty resources for the proposed programs?

4. Instructional delivery systems. Traditional modes of delivering instruction will no doubt serve to meet certain needs; new programs may, however, require a variety of alternative arrangements. For example, the workplace may be used for instructional purposes, thereby taking instruction to the student rather than the student to instruction on campus.

A dilemma in selecting alternatives is that their effectiveness is not known. Institutions should therefore assess the various alternatives by using both summative and formative evaluation modes. The concept of a residency requirement, for example, might need to be altered. Faculty members, geared to standard formats, may need to change their attitudes about both the student and the various instructional techniques. Recent literature in adult education suggests that some teaching techniques are more appropriate than others for working with adults, these techniques should be identified (Knowles, 1970). It is my belief that teaching seminars should be developed for faculty involved in adult

programs and, too, that such faculty should be selected with care. It might be unwise to match students undergoing a mid-career crisis with faculty members in the same predicament.

5. Placement services. Institutions cannot guarantee employment for students upon program completion, but they can facilitate the job search. For the student, the issue is not career planning--as it might be for the typical undergraduate--but entering a new field. If age discrimination exists in university admissions procedures, it most certainly exists in the marketplace. Special efforts on the part of placement personnel will be required to overcome that discrimination.

6. Research. Research efforts focusing on the issues outlined in this article should not be left to chance or to the whim of individual faculty members; on the contrary, they should be systematic and well organized. They will also require a high level of financial support. In the area of research, graduate universities could make major contributions.

Conclusion

I have no doubt that in the future increasing numbers of people will attempt to make career shifts and that some of these shifts will necessitate additional professional education. Other people, such as women whose children have left home and retired persons, may wish to secure additional education. The existence of this large clientele, however--even in this day of declining enrollments--does not necessarily mean that all institutions should decide to cater to it.

Those who do, as I have indicated, should first give thoughtful consideration to institutional mission and capability.

A problem for large, multi-purpose institutions developing new programs and delivery systems for such clientele is making the distinction between a professional school and a trade school. All programs in an institution draw their strength and identity from their relationship with that institution. One can therefore expect that in the development of new programs, there will be conflicts among traditional institutional goals, student needs, workplace requirements, and faculty incentives.

Reference Note

1. Sarason, S. Personal communication, March 4, 1976.

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